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## Briefing Note: League Tables

- 1 On 08 April 2008, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published a report *Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England*.
- 2 The report analyses the methodologies and underlying data of five league tables and examines their impact on higher education institutions in England.
- 3 The main findings about the league tables are:
  - (a) The league tables do not provide a complete picture of the sector because their emphasis on full-time, undergraduate provision and institutional rather than subject-based rankings excludes specialist, postgraduate, small, or predominantly part-time institutions from the rankings.
  - (b) Some of the measures included are poor proxies for the qualities identified. The measures used are largely determined by the data available rather than by clear and coherent concepts of, for example, 'excellence' or 'a world class university'.
  - (c) There is insufficient transparency about the way in which league tables are compiled. Methods for calculating scores are not always clear and in some instances appear not to be standardised.
  - (d) The resulting rankings largely reflect reputational factors and not necessarily the quality or performance of institutions.
  - (e) The format and content of league tables could be brought up to date and made more accessible to users.
- 4 The main findings about the impact of league tables on institutional decision-making are:
  - (a) Institutions are strongly influenced by league tables, although institutions may be reluctant to admit this. League tables are being used as key performance indicators, strategic targets, and drivers for internal change.
  - (b) Institutions do not feel they have sufficient influence on the compilers and the methodologies used in the rankings, and there is concern about the lack of transparency.

- (c) Institutions are responding to the National Student Survey.
- (d) League tables have resulted in better data collection.
- (e) Staff are affected by league tables. Although many are sceptical of the methodologies of league tables, the rankings appear to affect staff morale. There does not appear to be a significant influence on academic staff recruitment.
- (f) League tables may conflict with other priorities e.g. institutional and governmental concerns about academic standards, widening participation, community engagement, provision of socially-valued subjects.

5 The report's general conclusions are:

- (a) The impact of league tables is increasing nationally and internationally and cannot be ignored despite serious methodological limitations.
- (b) It is possible that the influence of league tables will increase further if the cap on tuition fees is raised and that rankings position will affect an institution's ability to charge the highest fees across all its courses.
- (c) There is an onus on policy makers and institutions to promote greater public understanding of league tables and alternative sources of information about higher education.

6 The full report is available online at:

[www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08\\_14/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_14/)

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